

God and the Gods In Hinduism

AN INSPIRED TALK BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIOYASWAMI



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Devotion to God and the Gods of Hinduism is known as Bhakti. It is an entire realm of knowledge and practice unto itself, ranging from the childlike wonder of the unknown and the mysterious to the deep reverence which comes with understanding of esoteric interworkings of the three worlds.

Hinduism views existence as composed of three worlds.

- The First World is the physical universe;
- The Second World is the subtle astral or mental plane of existence in which the devas, angels and spirits live; and
- The Third World is the spiritual universe of the Mahadevas, “great shining beings,” our Hindu Gods.

Hinduism is the harmonious working together of these three worlds.

The most prevalent expression of worship for the Hindu comes as devotion to God and the Gods. In the Hindu pantheon there are said to be three hundred and thirty-three million Gods. Hindus believe in one Supreme Being. The plurality of Gods are perceived as divine creations of that one Being. So, Hinduism has one supreme God, but it has an extensive hierarchy of Gods. Many people look at the Gods as mere symbols, representations of forces or mind strata, or as various Personifications generated as a projection of man’s mind onto an impersonal pure Beingness. Many Hindus have been told over and over that the Gods are not really beings, but merely symbols of spiritual matters, and unfortunately many have accepted this erroneous notion about the Gods. In reality, the Mahadevas are individual soul beings, and down through the ages ordinary men and women, great saints and sages, prophets and mystics in all cultures have inwardly seen, heard, and been profoundly influenced by these superconscious inner plane beings. Lord Ganesha is such a being. He can think just as we can think. He can see and understand and make decisions - so vast in their implications and complexity that we could never comprehend them with our human faculties and understanding.

“Great indeed are the Gods who have sprung out of Brahman.”

- Atharva Veda

A Hierarchy of Gods Guide Hinduism

A unique and all-encompassing characteristic of Hinduism is that one devotee may be

worshipping Ganesha while a friend worships Siva or Vishnu or Kali, yet both honor the other's choice and feel no sense of conflict. The Hindu religion brings us the gift of tolerance that allows for different stages of worship, different and personal expressions of devotion and even different Gods to guide our life on this earth.

Hinduism is a family of four main denominations - Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Smartism - under a divine hierarchy of Mahadevas. These intelligent beings have evolved through eons of time and are able to help mankind without themselves having to live in a physical body. These great Mahadevas, with their multitudes of angelic devas, live and work constantly and tirelessly for the people of our religion, protecting and guiding them, opening new doors and closing unused ones.

In the Vedas, God is called Brahman, the Supreme Being who simultaneously exists as the absolute transcendent Parabrahman, as omniscient consciousness or shakti power and as the personal prime Deity. The word Brahman comes from the Sanskrit root Brh which means to grow, manifest, expand, referring to the Brahman Mind of pure consciousness that underlies, emanates and resonates as all existence. Brahman is simultaneously Purusha, the Primal Soul. He is perfection of being, the original soul who creates/emanates innumerable individual souls - including the Gods. Some Gods, such as Lord Ganesha, did not undergo evolution as we know it, but were emanated as mature Mahadevas whose minds simultaneously govern and interpenetrate specific orders of space and time. They are so close to Brahman that they fulfill their cosmic functions in perfect accord with God's wisdom, intent and action.

“He who is beyond all exists as the relative universe. That part of Him appears as sentient and insentient beings. From a part of Him was born the body of the universe, and out of this body were born the Gods, the earth and men.”

- Rig Veda

As God and the Gods are individual soul beings, so too is humankind. The soul body is a body of light which evolves and matures into the likeness of Purusha Brahman just as the seed of a tree one day becomes a tree. Within this body of light and consciousness exist, without beginning or end, the two perfections of Parabrahman and Satchidananda. Satchidananda is the superconscious mind of the soul body - the mind of Brahman. Parabrahman is the inmost core of the soul. We are That. We do not become That.

“He who sparkles in your eyes, who lights the heavens and hides in the souls of all creatures is God, your Self.”

- Siva Yogaswami of the Natha Sampradaya

Our soul body is slowly evolving. Man has five bodies, each more subtle than the last. Visualize the soul of man as a lightbulb and his various bodies or sheaths as colored

fabrics covering the pure white light. The physical body is the outermost body. Next comes the pranic body, then the physical body's subtle duplicate, the astral body. Then there is the mental or intellectual body in which one can travel instantaneously anywhere. Then comes the body of the soul. This is the body that evolves from birth to birth, that reincarnates into new outer sheaths and does not die when the physical body returns its elements to the earth. The soul body eventually evolves as the body of golden light, the golden body of the soul. This soul body in its final evolution is the most perfect form, the prototype of human form. Once physical births have ceased, this soul body still continues to evolve in subtle realms of existence. This effulgent body of the illumined soul, even after Nirvikalpa Samadhi, God-Realization, continues to evolve in the inner worlds until the final merger into Brahman.

“When beholding by this yoga, he beholds the Gold-colored maker, the Lord, the Purusha, Brahman, the cause.”

- Maitrayana Upanishad

Do God and the Gods have Gender?

Esoterically, it must be admitted that none of the Gods has a wife. Their consorts are not to be considered as separate from them, but as aspects of their being, as their shakti or power. The Mahadevas who live in the Third World cannot be likened to men and women who live on the earth. They exist in perfectly evolved soul bodies, bodies which are not properly differentiated by sex. They are pure beings made of pure consciousness and light; they are neither male nor female. To better understand these Divine Gods, we sometimes conceive them as being the man if they are strong in expression or the woman if they are gentle and compassionate. There are no husbands and wives in the vast, superconscious realms of the Third World. The husband/wife notion is a puranic myth. The term Goddess can refer to a female perception or depiction of a Third World being (Mahadeva) in its natural state, which is genderless, or to a Second World being residing in a female astral-mental body. For example, Lakshmi and Sarasvati are not wives of Vishnu and Brahma, but personified powers of a sexless Deity who extends abundance and learning through the motherly empathy of a female form. And many of the village deities who protect children and crops are actually souls living close to earth in the astral plane, still functioning through the astral female or male body that is a duplicate of their last physical body.

“They meditate on Her to become immortal. The Lord of immortals blesses you. He who wears the Ganga and contains Her - strive to reach Him.”

- St. Tirumular of the Natha Sampradaya

Communicating with God and the Gods

It is in the Hindu temple that the three worlds meet and devotees invoke the Gods of our religion. The temple is built as a palace in which the Gods live. It is the home of the Gods, a sacred place unlike every other place on the earth. The Hindu must associate himself with these Gods in a very sensitive way when he approaches the temple. Though the devotee rarely has the psychic vision of the Deity, he is aware of the God's divine presence. As he approaches the sanctum sanctorum, the Hindu is fully aware that an intelligent being, greater and more evolved than himself, is there. This God is intently aware of him, safeguarding him, fully knowing his inmost thought, fully capable of coping with any situation the devotee may mentally lay at his Holy Feet. It is important that we approach the Deity in this way - conscious and confident that our needs are known in the inner spiritual worlds.

The physical representation of the God, be it a stone or metal image, a yantra or other sacred form, simply marks the place that the God will manifest in or hover over in his etheric body. It can be conceived as an antenna to receive the divine rays of the God or as the material body in or through which the God manifests in this First World. When we perform puja, a religious ritual, we are attracting the attention of the devas and Mahadevas in the inner worlds. That is the purpose of a puja; it is a form of communication. To enhance this communication we establish an altar in the temple or in the home. This becomes charged or magnetized through our devotional thoughts and feelings which radiate out and affect the surrounding environment. You can feel the presence of these divine beings, and this radiation from them is known as shakti.

Shakti is a vibration. It is first experienced in the simple physical glimpse of the form of the Deity in the sanctum. Later that physical sight gives way to a clairvoyant vision or to a refined cognition received through the sensitive ganglia within your nerve system: the chakras. Through these receptors a subtle message is received, often not consciously. Perhaps not immediately, but the message that the shakti carries from the Mahadeva manifests in your life. This is the way the Gods converse. It is a communication more real than the communication of language that you experience each day.

How God and the Gods Help Us

Visiting a Hindu temple, receiving the shakti from the majestic Gods of our religion, can altogether change the life of an individual. It alters the flow of the pranas or life currents within his body. It draws his awareness into the deeper chakras. But the change is slow. He lives with the experience for months and months after his visit to the temple. The devotee comes to know and love the Deity. The Deity extends sublime psychic assistance, but **never** tests or punishes a devotee. Shakti coming from the great temples of our Gods can change the patterns of karma dating back many past lives, clearing and clarifying conditions that were created hundreds of years ago and are but seeds now, waiting to manifest in the future. Through the grace of the Gods those seeds can be removed, if the manifestation in the future would not enhance the evolution of the soul.

“As the worshipper sees the image of his Deity in stone, clay, wood, or painting, then the God grants light from the Self completely of His own accord. Thus as fire from wood, the moon casts its reflection in the water pot spontaneously.”

- Karana Agama

If a temple or shrine is not available for worship, then it is possible to establish a communication with the Deity through visualization. Take for example, Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed governor of nature, dharma, science and knowledge. Worship of Lord Ganesha is immediate; to think of His form is to contact Him. Close your eyes for a second, visualize His murthi or form and a direct communication has begun. This is like punching in a code on a computer terminal which gives immediate access to a central supercomputer. All information and answers to every question are now available. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we can use the computer terminal of our brain and code in the divine image of Lord Ganesha. We have complete access to His grand computer mind which has been programmed over eons of time and naturally encompasses the intricacies of the universe in all its ramifications and simplicities.

Toward Ultimate Communion: Yoga

Hindus look to God and the Gods for very practical assistance - from affairs of employment, family, heart to knowledge both secular and superconscious. A Hindu devoutly believes that the Gods from their dwelling in the Third World are capable of consciously working with the forces of evolution in the universe and they could then certainly manage a few simpler problems. He devoutly believes that the Gods are given to care for man on the planet and see him through his tenure on earth and that their decisions are vast in their implications. Their overview spans time itself, and yet their detailed focus upon the complicated fabric of human affairs is just as awesome.

It is through the sanction of the Gods that the Hindu undertakes the practice of yoga - that orthodox and strictly Hindu science of meditation that leads to union of the many with the One. Yoga is the culmination of years of religious and devotional service and can only be successful with the support of the Gods who are the sentries guarding the gates of the various strata of consciousness. This sanction, once obtained, can and does allow the kundalini force within the core of the spine to safely rise and merge with the Supreme that all Hindus know is the Absolute - timeless, causeless, and spaceless. But first much work has to be done, much work and worship.

Finally, it must be clearly understood that God and the Gods are not a psychological product of the Hindu religious mind. They are far older than the universe and are the fountainheads of its galactic energies, shining stars and sunlit planets. They are loving overseers and custodians of the cosmos, earth and mankind. The Hindu cosmological terrain envelopes all of humanity. It is not exclusive. Hinduism has historically accepted converts from other religions and adoptives (those with no previous faith) into its

knowledge and practices. The Vedic rishis spoke of guiding strangers into the full embrace of the Sanatana Dharma, "the Eternal Path" and into the universal sanctuary of the Hindu pantheon. A vedic rite called vratyastoma purified those returning to Hinduism and Swami Vivekananda declared, "Why, born aliens have been converted in the past by crowds, and the process is still going on." Each citizen of earth so interested has the option of entering the Hindu religion.

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